A View Through HIJAB

by

Khaula Nakata

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THE HIJĀB

نظرة عن الحجاب من الداخل

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In the beginning of the 1990's when I embraced Islām in France,[1] the controversy surrounding the wearing of *hijāb*[2] in school was an extremely heated issue. The French were faced with economic problems which had resulted in high unemployment and social insecurity. This was predominantly felt in the big cities. The immigrant population, especially from Muslim countries, was seen as one of the causes of unemployment. The sight of *hijāb* in their towns and schools aggravated already negative attitudes towards Muslims. The majority of people thought that allowing students to wear *hijāb* was against the public education system's principle of neutrality on religion. I had not yet become a Muslim, and I did not understand why the schools were so concerned over a mere piece of cloth worn on a student's head. Observing the *hijāb* from the outside, I also did not understand its significance to Muslims. But I considered that in maintaining neutrality in matters of religion, the schools should still respect a student's

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[1]The author, who is Japanese, embraced Islām in January 1991 one month after her first encounter with it. "That period of time," she recalls, "was sufficient for me to recognize the truth in Islām and accept it. It was a decisive turning point in my life."

[2]Literally, "cover, partition or screen." Used initially in this text to refer to a headscarf but later refers to a complete covering.

beliefs and his performance of religious duties. As long as this expression did not disturb the school's discipline, it should be not be prohibited.[3]

The French, along with most westerners, expected that the *hijāb* would pass away into history as westernization and secularization took root. However, in the Muslim world, especially among the younger generation, a great wave of returning to *hijāb* was spreading through various countries. This current resurgence is an expression of Islāmic revival. It is part of the process of restoring to the Muslims their pride and identity, which had been repeatedly attacked through colonization and economic exploitation.

I come from Japan. In our history we experienced the first contact with western culture during the Meiji era.[4] During this period the Japanese reacted against western lifestyle, including western dress. So to my people the adherence of the Arabs and others to Islām could be compared to the conservative traditionalism or anti-westernization that the Japanese themselves experienced. Man seems to have a conservative tendency and consequently rejects and reacts ignorantly against the new and unfamiliar. He seldom stops to investigate or understand whether it is good or bad.

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[3]Because of wearing *hijāb,* some Muslim girls have actually been expelled from French schools.

[4]In the 1860's when Japan was closed to foreign countries.

So it is with non-Muslim people who judge the *hijāb* as a sign of oppression. They believe that Muslim women are enslaved by tradition and are unaware of their "lamentable" situation. These people think a Muslim woman's salvation will come through a woman's liberation movement or some other type of socio-economical uplift which will give her independence, awaken her mind, and release her from the bonds of tradition and *hijāb.*

This naive point of view is commonly shared by those who have little knowledge about Islām. Accustomed to secularism and religious eclecticism, non-Muslims are simply unable to comprehend why anyone would want to mold his or her life to conform to a religious system established many centuries ago. They do not understand Islām's strength and appeal, which is universal and eternal. They are disturbed by the fact that an increasing number of women of divergent nationalities all over the world are turning to Islām and covering themselves. They feel uneasy about this "strange object" – an opaque material which not only covers the woman's hair but also hides something special to which their eyes can have no access. From the outside a non-Muslim can never effectively see what is behind the *hijāb.* Neither could I. Many books dealing with the subject do so simply from a point of external observation. Their authors cannot grasp what a female perceives from behind the

hijāb. And only after I became a Muslim in 1991 did my vision become clear.

I have no country, tradition or social identity to defend through the *hijāb.* It upholds neither social nor political significance to me. It signifies only religious conviction.

During the process of deciding whether or not to embrace Islām, I neither seriously contemplated my ability to perform the required five daily prayers nor deeply thought about wearing the *hijāb.* Maybe I was afraid I would discover within myself a negative response which would affect my decision to become a Muslim. Until my first visit to the mosque in Paris, I had lived in a world which had no connection to Islām. I was not at all familiar with prayer and Islāmic cover, and I could hardly imagine myself ever performing these duties or adopting those ways. Yet something happened within me, and my desire to enter the fold of Islām was so strong that I did not really worry about what awaited me following my conversion. Indeed, it seems remarkable, but I was guided into Islām by the grace of Allāh.

The First Step

After my conversion, although I was not accustomed to wearing *hijāb,* I soon began to realize its benefit. A few days after my first attendance of the

Sunday Islāmic lecture at the mosque, I bought a scarf to put on the following Sunday. No one told me to wear a scarf – I just wanted to do so out of respect for the mosque and the other Muslim sisters there. I was impatient for Sunday to come because the lecture had inspired me with a spiritual elation I never experienced previously. My heart, so hungry for spiritual nourishment, absorbed every word of the lecture like a dry sponge absorbs water. Before going to the lecture room the next Sunday, I made *wuḏhū'* (ritual ablution) and put on the scarf. After the lecture I entered the prayer room for the first time. Filled with solemn silence, I prayed along with other sisters. The few hours I spent at the mosque made me feel so happy and content that I kept my scarf on even after leaving in order to preserve this happiness in my heart. Due to the cold weather at that time, my scarf did not attract attention. This was my first public appearance in *hijāb,* and I sensed a difference within myself. I felt purified and protected. I felt closer to Allāh (*subḥānahu wa ta'ālā*).

As a Japanese woman in a foreign country I was sometimes uneasy in public places when men stared at me. Yet, with my *hijāb* I felt protected. I no longer perceived myself as an object of impolite stares.

Whenever I went out thereafter, I dressed in *hijāb.* It was a spontaneous and voluntary act which

no one forced upon me. The first book I read on Islām explained *hijāb* in moderate terms, saying, "Allāh recommends it strongly." If someone in a commanding tone had said, "You must wear *hijāb* as soon as you enter Islām," I might have wanted to revolt against that order. The meaning of the word "Islām" is submission to Allāh's will and obedience to His command. For a person such as I, who had lived many years without a religion, it was difficult to follow *any* command without reservation. But Allāh's orders are without fault, and the correct Islāmic attitude is to accept and implement them without questioning. It is only man's understanding that is faulty. And I, like many others, only believed in my own power of reasoning and continuously questioned the need to adhere to any existing authority or system of values. However, at this point in my life my will spontaneously conformed to Allāh's will, and I was able to fulfill my Islāmic duties without any feeling of having been compelled, *al-ḥamdulillāh.*

I became content in my new covering, which was not only a sign of my obedience to Allāh but also an open manifestation of my faith. A Muslim woman who wears *hijāb* is clearly distinguishable in a crowd. In contrast, it is often only through verbalization that a non-Muslim's faith can be known. With the *hijāb* on I do not need to utter a word. It is a clear expression of my belief, a reminder to others that Allāh exists,

and a reminder to me of my submission to Allāh. My *hijāb* prompts me, "Be careful, you should conduct yourself as a Muslim." Just as a policeman in uniform becomes more conscious of his profession, my *hijāb* strengthens my identity as a Muslim.

The *hijāb* allows Muslims to recognize one another and enhances our feelings of sisterhood. For example, once I was on my way to attend an Islāmic study group but was unsure of its location. While waiting for the bus, I noticed some sisters in *hijāb.* I assumed that they were intending to go to the same study group, so I greeted them with "*as-salāmu 'alaykum*" and proceeded to join them. In our shared sisterhood we exchange greetings without even knowing one another. This is recommended in Islām, for the Prophet (ﷺ) said: "...and greet those whom you know and those whom you do not know."[5]

The Second Step

Two weeks after my conversion I returned to Japan to attend my sister's wedding. Embracing Islām, I had discovered what I was searching for. As a result, I was no longer interested in obtaining a doctorate in French literature. Instead, my passion turned to learning Arabic and the Qur'ān, so I decided not to return to France.

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[5]Narrated by al-Bukhārī.

Remaining in a small Japanese town was certainly a test. I was a new convert with very little Islāmic knowledge and completely isolated from other Muslims. Yet this isolation intensified my Islāmic consciousness. Accomplishing the five daily prayers and wearing a scarf helped to confirm my Islāmic identity and strengthened my relation with Allāh. In my solitude I turned often to Allāh.

The manner in which I dressed now went through its first major change. In public, Islām prohibits women from revealing the shape of their bodies; therefore, I had to abandon many of the clothes which accentuated my shape. Miniskirts, pants and short sleeved blouses do not conform with *hijāb,* so I made myself a Pakistani style pants and top. It did not bother me when people stared at my "strange" new fashion.

The Third Step

Six months after my conversion I traveled to Egypt. I had decided to pursue my intense desire to study Arabic and Islām in a Muslim country. In Cairo I knew only one Japanese person, and no one in my host family spoke English. I was extremely surprised at the first sight of my hostess. She was covered in black from head to toe, including her face. Previously in France I had seen a woman in a black dress and

face cover. I had attended a large Islāmic conference and her presence among the other Muslims, who were wearing colorful dresses and scarves, appeared very strange. I recalled thinking to myself, "This is a woman enslaved by Arab tradition, unaware of the real teachings of Islām!" At that time my Islāmic knowledge was very limited and I believed that covering the face stemmed from ethnic tradition, having no foundation within Islām. A similar thought came to me as this woman in Egypt led me into her home. I wanted to say to her, "You are exaggerating. This is unnatural." Her attempts to avoid any contact with men also seemed abnormal.

Shortly thereafter, this sister informed me that my attire was unsuitable to wear in public. Although I believed my apparel satisfied the requirements of Islāmic dress, I was flexible enough to adapt, as suggested in the cliché: "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." I sewed a long black dress and a long headcover called a "*khimār.*" Thus, I was completely covered except my face, and I even considered veiling. It seemed like a good idea in order to avoid the continual dust in the air, but the sister said that there was no need, perhaps thinking that I would not be able to do this in Japan or that my intention was not correct. These sisters firmly believed that covering the face was a part of their religious duty.

Most of the sisters with whom I became acquainted veiled. However, they constituted only a small minority within the huge city of Cairo. Some people were apparently shocked and embarrassed even at the sight of my black *khimār.* Average westernized Egyptians kept their distance from the covered Muslim women, calling them "*al-akhawāt*" ("the sisters"). Yet at the same time, men treated them with a special respect and politeness. These "sisters" seemed also to share a special bond. Generally speaking, the women who completely veiled were more conscientious of their belief. Those who wore simple scarves or none at all appeared unconcerned with their religious obligation.

Before my conversion I had preferred an active pants style to a feminine skirt. But now my new long dress pleased me very much. I felt as exquisite as a princess. Besides, I found it to be more comfortable. I did not dislike wearing black. On the contrary, I found that my black wear was quite suitable in a dusty city like Cairo. My Muslim sisters in black dress and *khimār* looked elegant, and when they removed their facecovers, a sort of inner radiance was apparent.

During my stay in Cairo, I was happy in black. However, I reacted negatively to my Egyptian sister's recommendation that I remain so even when I returned to Japan. I became angry with what I considered anachronism and ignorance of the

circumstances. My understanding was that Islām commands women to cover their bodies and conceal their figures. As long as this is accomplished, one may adopt any style of cover she pleases.[6] Each society has its own fashion. I assumed that if I appeared in a long black dress on the streets of Japan, I would be considered a lunatic. I argued with my Egyptian sister, explaining that my apparel would shock the Japanese and that they would not listen to me. They would reject Islām on appearance alone, never trying to hear or understand its teachings.

By the end of my stay in Egypt, however, I had become accustomed to my new long attire and even considered wearing it in Japan. However, I still regarded wearing black in my country a bit shocking, so I made some light colored dresses and white *khimārs.* Dressed in this manner I once again returned to my homeland.

The Fourth Step

The number of Muslims in Japan are few and therefore seldom seen. Yet the response of the Japanese to my white *khimār* was encouraging. I encountered neither rejection nor mockery. People

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[6]There are some stipulations about Islāmic covering, i.e., it should neither be tight fitting, transparent or decorative in itself.

assumed that I belonged to a religion, but they did not know which one. I overheard a young girl whispering to her friend that I was a Buddhist nun. Actually, long before becoming a Muslim I had a longing for the religious life of a nun. It is interesting to notice the external similarities between a Muslim woman and a Buddhist or Christian nun. Once on a visit to Paris, I was in the same subway car with a Catholic nun. I could barely restrain my smile because we appeared so similar. The Catholic nun's covering is a symbol of her devotion to Allāh, and she is respected and recognized for this. Likewise, the *hijāb* is a symbol of devotion for every Muslim woman. I wonder why people who respect the nun's covering criticize the *hijāb* of a Muslim, considering it instead a symbol of extremism or oppression.

Once on a train an elderly man asked me why I was dressed in such a peculiar fashion. I explained to him that I was a Muslim and that in Islām women are required to cover their bodies in public. Weak men have difficulty in resisting the temptation of a woman's charm and beauty. One may argue that a man does not always look at a woman with sexual passion. This is true, but the problem is with those who do. Look at the tremendous amount of sexual harassment and sex-related crime occurring in many societies. We cannot expect prevention of these occurrences by only appealing to man's higher

morality and self-control. The solution is the Islāmic way of life, which orders women to cover themselves and avoid contact with men as much as possible. As a short skirt might be interpreted to mean, "If you want me, you may take me," a *hijāb* clearly states, "I am forbidden to you." The man seemed extremely impressed by this explanation, perhaps because he disliked the provocative fashion of today's women. He left the train thanking me, saying he wished we had more time to talk about Islām. The Japanese are not normally accustomed to religious discussions, yet my *hijāb* opened the door for a conversation on Islām.

Within my family, my father felt sorry for me because I was fully covered, even on the hottest day. Everyone is hot in the summer, but I found the *hijāb* a convenient means to avoid the direct sunlight on my head and neck. Perhaps my relatives felt awkward around me, yet I felt uneasy looking at the thigh of my younger sister dressed in shorts. Even before my conversion, the sight of a woman's shape outlined by skintight thin clothes bothered me. I felt as if I had seen something not to be viewed. If this embarrassed me, a person of the same gender, it is not difficult to imagine how it affects men.

Some wives only get dressed up when they go out, not caring how they appear at home. But in Islām a wife tries to be beautiful for her husband. A husband also tries to look pleasant for his wife. This

consideration for each other makes conjugal life pleasant and joyful. Why would a wife want to attract another man's attention? She is a married woman! Would she like other women to entice her husband? So one can see how Islāmic dress even helps to maintain the stability of a family.

It is not only women who are commanded to cover their bodies, but men must observe modesty as well. Even during sporting activities, males must cover themselves from at least the waist to the knees.

Non-Muslims may think that Muslims are overly sensitive and even backward in their efforts to cover themselves. They may ask, "Why hide the body in its natural state?" Some people feel no shame swimming in bikinis or attending nudist beaches. Yet, in Japan fifty years ago it was considered vulgar even to swim in a bathing suit. And in medieval times a knight trembled at a brief sight of his adored lady's shoe. This shows that the socially acceptable standards of what should be concealed can and has changed. If you keep something hidden, it increases in value. Keeping a woman's body hidden adds to its charm, as is evident within various cultures of the world. If moral standards can be affected by time, it is not improbable to imagine people in the future walking on the street without clothes. There would be nothing to prevent it. As for us Muslims, the criterion is fixed for all times by Allāh. We follow His order because

we are aware that He is the Creator who knows what is best for His creation.

I think the civilization of mankind started when he acquired a sense of shame. If a man only seeks to fulfill his bodily desires and functions and does so openly and publicly, he is no different than an animal. Is this the direction in which modern man is going? Who is to determine the boundaries of proper dress and behavior – man himself (whose values change with the wind) or Allāh? Only He, in His wisdom, knows man's condition at all times and has therefore defined the correct way for him to appear and act in public.

The Fifth Step

Three months after my return to Japan, my husband[7] and I traveled to Saudi Arabia, where he obtained employment. I had prepared a small black facecover called a *niqāb*. It was not that I had begun to think like the sister in Cairo, i.e., that a veil was a required part of a Muslim woman's dress; rather, I thought that uncovering the face and hands was allowable. Yet I was eager to go to Saudi Arabia and wear the face cover. I was curious to know how I would feel behind it.

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[7]A Japanese Muslim studying at Cairo University whom I had married near the end of my stay in Egypt.

Arriving in Riyā<u>dh</u>, I discovered that not all women covered their faces. The non-Muslims nonchalantly wore a black outer garment over their shoulders without covering their heads. Many foreign Muslims did not wear veils. Yet all the Saudi women seemed to cover completely from head to toe.

Previously I had wondered how easily sisters could breathe under a veil. It seemed to be a matter of habit; once accustomed to it, there was no inconvenience. The first time I wore the *niqāb* I felt nice, in fact extremely wonderful, as if I had become a special person. I felt like the owner of a masterpiece who enjoyed its secret pleasure. I had a treasure which no one knew about and which strangers were not allowed to see.

During the first few months in Riyā<u>dh</u>, only my eyes were uncovered. But when I made a winter outer garment, I included a thin eye cover. My garment became perfect and so did my comfort. I no longer felt uneasy in a crowd. I felt as if I had become invisible before men. Before my eyes were covered, I was sometimes uncomfortable when my glance accidentally met a man's. This new covering prevented, like dark eyeglasses, the visual intrusion of strangers.

A non-Muslim might notice a bearded man accompanied by a woman covered in black. Such a couple might be considered a caricature of the

oppressing-oppressed or possessing-possessed relationship thought to be characteristic of that between a husband and wife in Islām. But the fact is that the woman feels respected and guarded by one who really cares for her, or, if I may say so, as a princess escorted by her guard. It is erroneous to regard Muslim women merely as private possessions of men who jealously prevent them from being seen by strangers. A woman covers herself in obedience to Allāh for the sake of her own dignity and pride. She refuses to be possessed by the stare of a stranger or to be his object. She feels pity for western women who are displayed as objects of desire.

It has been over two years since I became a Muslim. My *hijāb* has changed five times with the change of both my surroundings and my religious understanding. Soon after my conversion in France, I wore fashionable matching dresses and scarves. Now in Saudi Arabia I cover completely in black, from head to toe. Thus, I have experienced the *hijāb* from its simplest to its complete form.

Many years ago when a Japanese Muslimah appeared with a headcover at an Islāmic organization in Tokyo, she was told by another Japanese Muslimah to reconsider the matter of her dress because it shocked people. Very few Muslim women in Japan covered their heads at that time. Now there are more and more Japanese women who are embracing Islām

and wearing the headcover in spite of difficult situations. All of them acknowledge that they are proud of their *hijāb* and that it strengthens their faith.

Viewing *hijāb* from the outside, one can never perceive what is observed from within it. We see the matter from two completely different perspectives. To a non-Muslim, Islām looks like a prison with no liberty or freedom. But living within Islām, we feel a peace, freedom and joy which is known in no other way. One might claim that a person born into Islām believes it is best only because it is a way of life with which he has always been acquainted – that he grew up without experiencing the outside world. But I am a convert. I abandoned the so-called freedom and pleasure of modern life and chose Islām. If it is true that Islām is a religion which oppresses women, why are so many women in Europe, America, Japan and elsewhere embracing Islām today? If only people would reflect upon this.

A person blinded by prejudice may not be able to see the beauty of a woman in *hijāb* – a woman who is self-confident, peaceful and dignified – not a shade or trace of oppression upon her face. The Qur'ān describes those who deny the signs of Allāh as being blind.[8] How else can we explain the disbeliever's lack of understanding towards Islām?

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[8]For example, see *Sūrah Yā Seen,* 36:9.